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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9tb5t5wj>

Journal

FEMINIST STUDIES, 38(1)

ISSN

0046-3663

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Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed

Can the Memoirist Speak?
Representing Iranian Women, Gender, and Sexuality
in Recent Popular and Scholarly Publications

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BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran. By Minoos Moallem. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran. By Nima Naghibi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema. By Negar Mottahedeh. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity. By Afsaneh Najmabadi. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire. Edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Sexual Politics in Modern Iran. By Janet Afary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution. By Pardis Mahdavi. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.

An understanding of the contemporary relations of power and of the Western intellectual's role within them, requires an examination of the intersection of a theory of representation and the political economy of global capitalism...

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "woman" as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.

—Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak"
in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*

WHAT IS THE "CIRCUMSCRIBED TASK" of the female Iranian intellectual? Haunted by the echoes of Orientalism, contemporary forms of Islamophobia, and a complex of overlapping patriarchies, she is dealt a heavy burden of representation. In particular, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, the intellectual must undertake a necessary engagement with global capitalism, since "Western intellectual production is, in many ways, complicit with Western international economic interests."¹ This observation holds true even in the context of diasporic, Third World feminist intellectual production if it is just as easily instrumentalized in the contemporary multicultural landscape. Spivak's words ring especially true in the context of recent publications by Iranian feminist scholars working on questions of gender and sexuality in Iran.

Iran occupies a mystified place in the Western cultural imagination, constructed as an object of fascination and contempt, desire and disgust. This mystification has simultaneously driven scores of audiences to art-house cinemas in search of authentic depictions of the state oppression of contemporary Iranians, while it has also inspired economic sanctions and threats of war against the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Liberals and academics alike — from Sean Penn to Michel Foucault — have been allured by this mystification, drawn like many to the nation's 1979 revolution and its most recent so-called "Green Movement" as paradigmatic events claimed as universally relevant exceptions to hegemonic political formations (the former), or as emblematic struggles for democracy (the latter).

This mystification is in part due to a long Orientalist and Middle Eastern area studies legacy, which laid the groundwork for the means by which Iran is represented in the media and understood within the Western political imagination today. As several of the authors whose work I review here point out, a concern for “women” emerged early on among Western women travelers who produced travelogues or missionaries who were eager to document women’s social roles.² And, as Minoo Moallem points out, this was continued through the postwar growth of Middle Eastern studies, which aided in “the upholding of masculinist and Orientalist traditions of knowledge formation in the field” (19).

The books I examine here generally agree on one thing: at the heart of Iran’s mystique lies an anxiety regarding gender and sexuality. This anxiety emerges organically from this Orientalist legacy through which the region it occupies and the majority religion that dominates the region — Islam — have been constructed. But in combination with Iran’s recent political history — which includes an early-twentieth-century constitutional revolution, a mid-century British and American sponsored coup d’état that overthrew a democratically elected prime minister, and the late-twentieth-century Iranian revolution and its contemporary wake — there is a complex comingling with the West that hinges on the tantalizations of veiling, sexuality, and a racialized Islamic alterity that has provoked a feminist reaction that spans the popular-scholarly spectrum. A constellation of scholarly and popular publications has emerged that orbits this triumvirate of veiling, sexuality, and Islam by examining either directly or indirectly the semiotic fusion of these complex signifiers in the production of the contemporary idea of Iran.

It is worth briefly contemplating how one is to determine what counts as gender and sexuality in studies of Iran. The overdetermined signifier of the veil and the work it is purported to perform complicates demarcating these boundaries. As the master-signifier for Islam in the West, the veil is read as sexualizing that which it aims to desexualize. What therefore counts as sexuality studies in the texts under review varies from a literal concern with the development of a so-called “sexual revolution” in the works of Pardis Mahdavi and Janet Afary, to an examination of the scopophilic work of film in producing or managing desire in and for

representations of Iranian women in the work of Nima Naghibi and Negar Mottahedeh. I argue that much of what is currently published pertaining to women and Iran—whether in trade or academic presses—signals this Western preoccupation with Iranian and, as Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi have put it, “Islamicate” sexualities. Some scholars explicitly explore the evolution of sexual identities as an indicator of an evolving Iranian modernity, while others read the management of sexual subjectivities through the transforming Iranian nation-state or through what Moallem calls the imposition of “civilizational imperialism” through colonial, cultural, and geo-political forces (31). But regardless of the object of study or the methods employed, contemporary representations of Iran almost always signal this anxiety, whether or not they overtly speak to this tripartite mechanism of intelligibility.

Recent publications that focus on the triumvirate as a portal to political history have appeared on both trade and academic publishing tracks. Popular trade publications such as Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novels, including the *Persepolis* series, or Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which represent some of the most popular titles in a genre that has amassed dozens of texts, have taken the memoir form, presenting minimal historical context and presupposing Iran’s infamy among a popular Western readership.³ Instead of historical context, these memoirs present first-person, slice-of-life glances into the circumstances through which most of the narrators undergo a secular, assimilationist transformation, more often than not involving some struggle over the theme of liberation and its denouement in Western modernity.

Such popular memoirs unfailingly set out to differentiate themselves from contemporary geopolitical renderings of Iran and its women as modernity’s counterpoint. The post-9/11 proliferation of these texts is due to their offering the pleasure of a native informant’s testimonial around issues such as modernity’s organicity in Iran, or the so-called universal human condition that Iranians are imagined to best exemplify, all the while sharing in the nationalist melancholia felt by the narrator for modernity’s decline in the wake of the IRI’s ascent. Middle-class, diasporic memoirists of the Nafisian or even the more popular Satrapian graphic novel-*cum*-filmic variety nostalgically recall performances of resistance,

style, and knowledge production that assume a “Western” reader reared on Orientalist imagery of agency-less veiled women under the thumb of overbearing Muslim men.

It is not only the reader’s pleasure that drives this industry. One must also ask what has inspired so many dozens of Iranian women to write themselves as suffering subjects for the memoir genre. I’d like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the double bind that this has constructed for the representation of Iranian women. As many have convincingly argued, Iranian historiography and politics have tended toward the representation of masculinist subjectivities. The memoir genre, however, offers a space within the Western mediascape for feminized Iranian subjects to “speak.” This incitement to speech is double-edged. While there is a great deal of injury to speak of, given the context of Iran’s brutal and undemocratic regimes of the last century and the specific targeting of women’s bodies for repression and gender and sexuality as instrumental sites for governmentality, there is little room for these subjects to be rendered as anything other than injured within the memoir genre. Western modernity consistently operates as the site of liberation from this abuse and injury, and sexuality is the favored trope that signifies this modernity or its lack.

While we could once identify the United Nations Decade for Women and the documents of international law such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) as responsible for constructing women and gender rights as barometers for modernity, scholars such as Lisa Duggan and Jasbir Puar have argued that sexuality is the current index.⁴ We now have the ironic situation of US imperialism not only deploying white men to save brown women from brown men (although, given the multicultural turn taken by the US military, it would more accurately be brown men saving brown women from other brown men), but with the repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, we can further amend this to a situation in which we have white gay men saving brown gay men from brown men. So the shift to sexuality in memoirs, as well as in scholarship, is in keeping with this wider trend.

The popular trade memoir, which I identify as a culture industry, is a limiting site for Iranian women who may imagine themselves as agents but are interpellated as injured subaltern subjects. While the lure of a

platform from which to be heard might entice Iranian women to speak, little beyond the narrative of injury at the hands of barbaric state, sexual, and/or familial/patriarchy Islamic masculinity and liberation by Western modernity can actually be heard, thus reiterating the by-now Spivakian truism that “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak.”⁵ Many have offered thoughtful commentary on this culture industry, and due to space limitations, I will not focus on these texts here.⁶ Instead I begin with a discussion of the plethora of popular feminist-memoir publications as a counterpoint to the scholarly work I aim to review in order to ask: What kind of contemporary moment yields this interesting tension and circulation of ideas in both popular and scholarly writing, and what is the relationship between the two? Despite the obvious differences between trade and academic publishing industries, it is worth considering whether or not there is a common thread that links them, especially if we look at the general growth of interest in women and gender in Iran.

For all of its empirical distinctions, academic publishing nevertheless constitutes an industry, one that has responded in earnest to the insatiable post-9/11 appetite for representations of the Middle East, Islam, and women. I am reminded, for example, of the prominently featured recent review of Harvard Divinity School professor Leila Ahmed’s book *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence from the Middle East to America* in the coveted Sunday edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, accompanied by a large, full-color photograph of Muslim women giddily trying on fashion hijabs.⁷ Access to a space such as the *Los Angeles Times* Sunday edition book review, typically reserved for high-profile trade publications projected for best-seller lists, requires, I would assume, the likes of a well-connected publicist. That a distinguished Arab women’s studies professor would find her book reviewed by another Arab professor (Laila Lalami) in the pages of a major US newspaper is less a comment on the newspaper’s discerning regard for and engagement with feminist theory and more a comment on the appeal that the book’s object—the veil—is imagined to have among nonacademics and its potential for crossover market success by the book’s, as well as the newspaper’s, publisher. And while I am delighted by the thought of the emergence of a vernacular feminist discourse informed by critical and engaged scholarship, I am instead led to believe that the book review

is less an indication of transnational feminist theory's ascendance onto a scene of public debate regarding the veil and more an indication of the academic publishing industry's centrist movement toward its desired new markets—the more lucrative ones that the trade press currently targets.

It would seem, therefore, that a parallel culture industry has developed in the women's and gender studies catalogs of major US-based university presses around work that examines gender, women, rights, and sexuality in Iran (and the Middle East more broadly). I am not suggesting that these parallel industries are publishing the same kind of material but rather that they are both responding to a demand for this subject matter that spans the popular-scholarly spectrum. In general, while this emergent wave of scholarly publications seeks to problematize and complicate simplistic and clichéd area studies depictions of Iran, its culture, its people, and its geopolitical ambitions, especially as these themes pertain to women, the interpellative power of the discursive space carved out by the memoir genre has lured even some scholarly works into its logic.

Some of the texts I examine seek women's perspectives as alternatives to mainstream, policy-oriented studies that focus on male agents and provocateurs (Afary); others consider gender and/or sexuality as primary lenses through which the region, its people, and its religion have been perceived by the West (Najmabadi, Moallem); and some unproblematically deploy the teleologic of Western modernity in an effort to prove its existence in contemporary Iran (Afary, Mahdavi). In what follows, I focus on the scholarly publications that exemplify the shifting terrain of sexuality studies in Iran in order to understand the various theoretical, methodological, and topical distinctions that mark this emergent field. I offer a survey of a developing field of gender and sexuality studies of Iran in order to gauge its capacity to distinguish itself from the discursive logic of the Iranian women's memoir genre. I perform close examinations of Minoo Moallem's *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, Nima Naghibi's *Rethinking Global Sisterhood*, Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, Negar Mottahedeh's *Displaced Allegories*, and Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi's edited volume *Islamicate Sexualities*—projects that redraw the boundaries of representation for gender and sexuality in Iran and thereby break the memoir genre's discursive monopoly on the subject matter. These

texts, I believe, move the field and the subject matter into territory not susceptible to the reductive logic of women's injury and modernist liberation. I follow this with a more general discussion of Pardis Mahdavi's *Passionate Uprisings* and Janet Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. These last two texts, I argue, have less successfully broken free of the discursive shackles of the culture industry logic and stand in stark contrast to the self-reflexive and critical tone of the former texts.

OVERVIEW OF TEXTS

MINOO Moallem, in her book *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*, has made critical contributions to the field of sexuality studies of Iran. She confronts the memoir logic at the outset of her study, engages with Islam and fundamentalism, and incorporates theories of transnational feminism in the interpretation of Iranian texts. The Western trope of the Muslim woman as preeminent victim of "barbaric" and fundamentalist Islamic patriarchy has become very important to Western regimes of knowledge, as evident in the recurrent deployment of "Islamic fundamentalism" in mainstream feminist scholarship. Moallem instead contends that fundamentalism is constitutive of and constituted by modern notions of gender and sexuality. She investigates the overlapping of gender and fundamentalism in Iran through a transnational feminist framework using postmodernity to think about the production of "other modernities" (a notion borrowed from Lisa Rofel⁸) in non-Euro-American locations, all the while critiquing theories of postmodernity for their shortcomings in addressing connections between colonialism and modernity. Moallem argues that Middle Eastern studies has particularly failed to address colonial modernity and its racial and sexual formations and has thus contributed to heteronormative and ethnocentric forms of knowledge production, reproducing "tradition" and "modernity" as opposing formations creating legitimacy for a "feminist civilizing mission." She examines feminist political activism outside of fundamentalist regimes of meaning-making, as well as representations of fundamentalism and the production of new religious subject-positions. She performs her analysis through the examination of tropes, images, signifiers, and narratives that feed social "regimes of truth" in

order to examine how the gendered Iranian subject was formed during the Iranian revolution. She deploys Foucault's theory of discursive formation to develop her idea of "fields of visibility" within Iranian modernity, arguing that these fields are both symbolic and material. She also examines how the narrative of an Islamic *ummat*—the postrevolutionary imagined community that binds nation and Islam—relies on the bodies of women and their precarious position on the fault lines of what she calls the "we-ness of the ummat" by occupying the position of the "Other." Moallem reads the figures of the "veiled Muslim woman" and the Western woman as signifiers of "unfreedom and freedom" and examines how these are incorporated into consumerist capitalism.

By opening with an anecdote that illuminates the predicament of racialization for Iranians in diaspora, Moallem establishes the problem of race as central to her project. This sets her work apart from the other texts, which primarily use gender and/or sexuality as single axes constituting the ontological problem that troubles or limits subjectivity. Instead, Moallem focuses on the gender problem in Reza Shah Pahlavi's—as well as in postrevolutionary—Iran vis-à-vis what she describes as "modernization as a process of racialization, in which the local is rejected and the West declared superior" (3).⁹ This racialization strategy functioned as a handmaiden to Iran's modernist project through a historically revisionist insistence upon Iranian origins in the Aryan race. Consolidated around the geographic and political name change from Persia to Iran, the nation-building project undertaken by Reza Shah Pahlavi at the twilight of the Qajar period was hinged upon a claim that the original Persians—the Pars or Farsi people—were descendants of the pre-Islamic, original Aryans. This fabrication resulted from a combination of misinterpreted linguistic origins that linked Iran with Europe and the conflation of the historical, pre-Islamic period of the Sassanid era's geographic name of Eran with white supremacist claims to Aryan origins for Northern European peoples.¹⁰ The occupation of a modern temporality for Iranians in the Pahlavi regime, according to Moallem, required what she refers to as "strategies of copying, passing and mimicking" the imagined West. As she argues, this mimesis did not challenge patriarchy but instead created hegemonic and subordinate forms that became collapsed into the categories of "modern" and

“traditional.” This continued into Ayatollah Khomeini’s ummat-building project, which emphasized Islam as the recognizable feature on a national body that consisted of an accumulation of these prior identities borrowed from the Western imaginary. Moallem’s deployment of critical race theory and transnational feminism together in the interpretation of Iranian modernity is unprecedented and makes a much-needed intervention into this emergent body of Iranian feminist scholarship.

Nima Naghibi’s *Rethinking Global Sisterhood* explores some similar themes to those of Moallem’s project by historicizing the figure of the abject Persian woman that is so familiar to readers of the memoir genre. Through archival research and by employing literary and filmic analytical methods, she elucidates how representations of the Persian woman as “abject, repressed, and licentious” became established in dominant Western and Iranian feminist discourses, as well as how the liberal feminist gets mutually constituted in opposition to this abject figure (x). Heavily influenced by Chandra Mohanty’s essays “Under Western Eyes” and “Under Western Eyes Revisited,” she focuses on Western women’s involvement in Persia/Iran from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.¹¹ Naghibi argues that British and American women writers constituted a subjugated female “other” against a more recognizable domestic image of female subjectivity. She illuminates how First World feminist empowerment is structured through the “figural subjugation” of Persian women, as well as how Persian women contest this abjection, while at the same time examining Iranian feminism’s responsibility for these imperialist gestures in Iran (xv). She also shows how the 1970s rhetoric of global sisterhood assumed the common oppression of women but was contingent upon the Eastern woman as a representative of women’s collective past (xxiv–xxv).

Naghibi critiques the discourse of sisterhood utilized by elite Persian women and so-called Pahlavi feminists to express solidarity with their Western counterparts due to the inherent inequality between “sisters,” arguing that by positioning the Persian women as the embodiment of oppressed womanhood, Western and elite Iranian women represented themselves as the epitome of modernity and progress (xviii). However, unlike Moallem, Naghibi fails to engage difference beyond class and nationality and opts for the generic use of the term “Persian Woman” against whom

the Western feminist and elite Iranian Pahlavi feminists constructed themselves, failing to acknowledge the complex and heterogeneous differences of ethnicity and race that contribute to this process. Most pertinent to this review essay, however, is her chapter titled “Female Homosocial Communities in Iranian Feminist Film” where she identifies alternative forms of dissent and gender and erotic performance through an analysis of “female bonding” (109).

Negar Mottahedeh’s *Displaced Allegories: Postrevolutionary Iranian Cinema* counterintuitively locates radical potential for the representation of Iranian women not in Western modernity but in the modesty codes imposed on postrevolutionary filmmakers. Mottahedeh identifies the modesty codes imposed on filmmakers by the postrevolutionary Ministry of Islamic Guidance as having inadvertently produced a “woman’s cinema” that stands in stark contrast to the masculinist gaze of classical Hollywood cinema (10). She hones in on the prolific Iranian film industry only touched on in Moallem and Naghibi’s projects, particularly the films of Bayza’i and Kiarostami as objects in the examination of what she calls the formation of this “woman’s cinema.” She begins with a discussion of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s intervention into what he saw as the nation’s “self-estrangement” resulting from the Shah’s yielding of Iranian media to Western powers. This led to what the Ayatollah saw as the contamination of the national body by foreign ideological influences, which stained the nation’s senses configuring the Iranian subject as *supranational*. Visual representations of women’s bodies marked the site of this contamination and thus the postrevolutionary film industry was charged with reeducating the national sensorium and constituting a new subject-spectator distinct from Hollywood’s formal systems of looking. Mottahedeh highlights the fact that Khomeini did not reject media altogether but instead sought to cleanse these technologies through the establishment of a system of modesty that required the representation of veiled women, which guarded against voyeurism and fetishism. Khomeini sought to establish a new Islamic society constituted through a unique sense perception. This was realized through “a new syntax of shot relations” bearing in mind the IRI’s prohibitions on the desiring look (3). As Mottahedeh argues, the post-revolutionary narrative structure of Iranian fictional cinema mediates

the national situation and the constraints on the industry in a displaced allegorical fashion. She aims to explore what happens in a cinema industry where voyeurism is proscribed and asks, “how is a cohesive sense of the real maintained and meaning produced in the cinematic grammar of Iranian films of the ’80s and ’90s?” (4).

As other scholars of Iranian cinema such as Hamid Naficy and Hamid Dabashi have suggested, innovative codes and conventions were created under conditions of visual censorship. Mottahedeh’s unique contribution to this otherwise masculinist field is that these codes exemplify the “feminist negative aesthetics” as exemplified by feminist gaze theory of the 1970s.¹² The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance imposed rules of modesty that “expressly acknowledged visuality as a site of a tactility that submits the viewer to the immediacy of heterosexual desire borne in the female body (5). . . . The act of veiling operates as a shield against this heterosexual desire.” (9). Mottahedeh argues that the modesty codes that require women to be veiled onscreen, even when represented in private spaces where no men are present, assume the ever-presence of the unrelated male viewer. The veil preemptively meets this male viewer’s desirous gaze, highlighting what she calls the film’s “looked-at-ness,” in contrast to the disavowal of the voyeuristic male gaze in classical Hollywood cinema. According to Mottahedeh, Iranian cinema’s address confronts the ever-present filmic gaze, rejecting cinematic voyeurism and instead producing national cinema as woman’s cinema. The act of “looking” in Iranian cinema collapses the distance between the subject who sees and the subject looked at by constructing this look as tactile; the presence of an unveiled woman onscreen interferes with the order of male public homosociality since the ever-presence of the veil addresses the ever-presence of an unrelated male viewer. In this way Mottahedeh is in conversation with Moallem’s project by identifying how public space is maintained as a male space despite the nation-state’s attempts at interpellating women as sisters in the ummat. Postrevolutionary Iranian cinema is always aware of the presence of the film viewer, and the veil signals a stance against the “hermetic” or “closed” system of representation that constructs a diegetic film space detached from the realm of the sacred. Whereas everyday life is separated between public and private, the encounter between

film diegesis and its audience in Iranian cinema articulates all spaces on screen as effectively public and in continuity with the space of the film's screening.

Afsaneh Najmabadi's groundbreaking study *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* insists that feminist scholars of Iran theorize gender and sexuality differently. In response to the oft-cited claim that women are rarely represented in the archives of Iranian history and are therefore absent from Iranian studies, Najmabadi sets out to "consider gender as an analytical category" (1). Gender functions for her as a hermeneutical tool in the analysis of the paradoxical problem of how homoerotic Sufi love, predominant in the Qajar period (1785–1925), morphed into the heteroerotic love that perpetuated the modern nation-building project characteristic of the subsequent Pahlavi dynasty.

As she describes it, this project was sparked by her realization that the Iranian national emblem of a lion holding a sword with a sun rising behind it had been mistakenly assumed—because of the lion's perceived beauty—to symbolize a female homeland emitting its beloved warmth and beauty onto the brotherhood of a male nation. Instead, she realized that the assumption that beautiful faces signified femaleness did not reflect nineteenth-century Qajar perceptions because "in the Qajar period a beautiful face could belong to either a young male or a female with identical features" (2). As she puts it, she encountered "sex trouble" when she began to trace the genealogy of Qajar-era notions of love, beauty, and homeland (2). Like many other historiographers of Iran's nineteenth century, Najmabadi had inadvertently employed the binary gender system in reading archival materials but, as she describes in the introduction, later came to realize that this was itself a limited modern framework that was thwarting her capacity to read other genders and sexualities at work during this period.

Through very close readings of Qajar-era paintings and travelogues, written both by elite Iranians in European settings as well as Europeans in Iran, Najmabadi historicizes the invention of heterosexual romance and the transformation of the institution of marriage from a procreative contract to one that presumed companionship contingent upon love. This invention had major social consequences in that it caused women to shift their loyalty from what she calls "female-female bonds" to bonds

with a husband. She follows this with chapters that examine the transforming role of women within the nationalist project, concluding with a chapter on revisionist historiographies of Iran that have selectively forgotten the presence of the figure of the *ghilman* (the young male object of an older man's desire), who was replaced by what she calls "the figure of female excess — the 'Westoxicated' woman who mindlessly imitates 'the West'" (8).

Najmabadi's book chronicles the transformation from the nonheteronormative desire of the Qajar period to the heteronormativity of the Iranian modernity. What sets her work apart from the other texts I examined is the critical contribution she has made to queer theory and how she has applied this diverse body of work to her interpretive techniques. Najmabadi's text can be credited with introducing queer theory into gender studies of Iran by employing it as a subversive reading practice used to reconsider archival objects such as Qajar-era paintings and nineteenth-century travel narratives. In particular, Najmabadi painstakingly historicizes the normalization of heterosexuality in the construction of Iranian modernity. What does not get developed in Najmabadi's text that Moallem elaborates on, however, is the mutual constitution of heteronormativity vis-à-vis the racial project of Iranian modernity with its constructed claims to Aryan origins. With the shift from the Qajar period to the monarchic rule of the Pahlavi dynasty came the simultaneous processes of nation building, modernization policies such as unveiling, companionate marriage, and the increased pressure to perform heteronormativity alongside claims to racial origins that would link Iran and the ruling Farsi ethnicity with northern Europe. This important connection highlighted in Moallem's work and overlooked by Najmabadi indicates the intersectional nature of race, gender, and sexuality to the formation of Iranian modernity (63).

Kathryn Babayan's and Afsaneh Najmabadi's volume *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* brings together a collection of essays that productively ruminate on the bind of working archivally and historiographically with the object of sexuality in Iran. It is an anthology that emerges from a Radcliffe Institute seminar that sought to complicate Foucauldian models that too often translate a binary that juxtaposes *scientia sexualis* (subjects endowed with certain scientifically classifiable

sexualities, ascribed by Foucault to Western culture) against *ars erotica* (an unmitigated desire and practice of pleasure transmitted from master to disciple through secrets, ascribed by Foucault to Eastern cultures). The anthology productively engages the need for materially localized readings of past sexualities represented within Islamicate texts by asking how desire can not only be recognized outside of its modern (or premodern) European valences but also translated into knowledge that is not always already reductive. Rather than employing the more familiar term “Middle East,” which they identify as a tainted area studies construction with little potential for reclamation, they use instead Marshall Hodgson’s term *Islamicate* — which highlights a complex of attitudes and practices that pertain to cultures and societies that live by various versions of Islam.¹³

The editors prompt contributors to explore culture through the analytical frame of sexuality (an approach Najmabadi also employs in her monograph reviewed above) by asking a key historiographic question: “[H]ave we scholars unwittingly made sexuality the ‘truth’ of our historiographies, well beyond the temporal and geographical confines of Foucault’s original proposition?” (xi). Questioning the suitability of the very notion of sexuality for interpreting “erotic sociabilities and sexual sensibilities before and beyond the predominant, Foucauldian frame of sexuality,” they ask what other inquiries are overshadowed by beginning with this premise (xi). In particular, they raise a key point that is otherwise missing from the other historiographic texts that I examined: What limitations do categories and typologies such as homosexual, heterosexual, and lesbian present in the reading of historical objects and texts? And while they acknowledge the benefits of sexuality studies’ move away from typological reasoning in exchange for the examination of practices, they also explore the pitfalls of this kind of logic, which inadvertently constructs sex as the truth to be uncovered. “Do acts define types?” they cleverly ask (xi). And with this question they simultaneously problematize the reduction of behavior to typology in addition to the collapsing of gender and sex and the reification of the binary sex/gender system.

Composed of eight chapters, an introduction and an epilogue, which take up both theoretical and methodological questions applied to various historical periods and sites in the Islamicate world, it is the final two

chapters of the anthology, Najmabadi's and Dina Al-Kassim's contributions, that offer the theoretical capstones to the project. Najmabadi's essay, "Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iran," seeks to get beyond the limitations of types or acts in order to instead interpret "the disciplinary and regulatory effects of classificatory regimes." (276) Al-Kassim's "Epilogue: Sexual Epistemologies, East in West" points to the dangers and limits of naming the desire that is sensed, seen, and heard in the archive (298).

While the above texts work actively at the "circumscribed task" that Spivak outlines in the opening epigraph by identifying alternative channels for imagining time, space, gender, sexuality, and subjectivity, the following texts fall short in this regard. Janet Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* is a far-reaching study that offers both a long historical perspective on transforming notions of normative and deviant sexualities in Iran as well as a broad picture of sexuality in postrevolutionary Iran. Perhaps it is this ambition to be comprehensive and at the same time historically and culturally nuanced that leaves many questions unaddressed in the book. Firstly, Afary does not adequately problematize nor situate what is meant by her use of the term "modern." In certain contexts modern seems simply to refer to contemporary phenomena while in other contexts it signals the evolved social, political, and legal practices of the West. This is further complicated by the structure of the text, her methodology, and her practice of periodization. The book suggests, both in its organization as well as in its utilization of concepts, that sexuality in Iran has progressed in a linear fashion toward what she refers to as "Westernized modernity." This periodization reaches its teleological apex in what she refers to as the "sexual revolution," a term that is never contextualized nor defined. Westernization is seen as having spawned a sexual revolution, but I wonder instead if we could perceive the IRI's imposed laws as having sparked a sexual revolution—especially if we more strictly applied the Foucauldian framework that she employs. Furthermore, Afary's handling of homoeroticism and homosexuality lacks the nuance and engagement with queer theory found in some of the previous texts. For example, she argues that one cannot talk about women's rights without addressing same-sex relations, but the very notion of "same-sex" is not problematized.

Instead, in referring to contemporary same-sex practices in Iran as “the gay lifestyle,” Afary paints a sterile sociological picture of monolithic “gay” subjects whose identities are limited to this singular frame of reference. It seems that in her ambitious effort to comprehensively represent a “Modern Iran,” she reifies its lack and failure, replicating the monologic of modernity employed widely within the Iranian memoir genre. While she makes overtures to cultural specificity, such as with the term “Islamist Modernity,” these notions ring hollow as mere disguises for Western modernity. For example, in an attempt at rendering what could be a uniquely Iranian modernity, she maintains the semantic standard of Western modernity as she writes:

Khomeini, unlike his ideological predecessor Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri in the Constitutional Revolution, did not completely turn his back on modernity. In the 1940s he appropriated some modern norms of hygiene and the requirements of a modern state. Later, he accepted select gender reforms, such as women’s suffrage, education, and active political participation. As the story of Dabbagh shows, even before the revolution, the pragmatic Khomeini was willing to bend rules and allow his disciples to adopt a modern lifestyle in order to promote the cause. (261)

Pardis Mahdavi’s *Passionate Uprisings: Iran’s Sexual Revolution* similarly seems to be confined to the narrative that Iranians achieved liberation through the techniques of Western modernity. Mahdavi focuses specifically on what she calls a “sexual revolution,” although her text does not elaborate ruptures or departures enough to justify the use of this term. Mahdavi’s account draws on interviews and surveys of middle-class Iranian youth from 2004–2007, and argues that a new sexual culture is emerging among Iranian young adults (9). Like many popular memoirs, though, its thesis of sexual revolution is presented in a rather journalistic fashion (indeed, Mahdavi began this project as a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*). She uncritically accepts her informants’ designation of their circumstances as a sexual revolution and leaves unexplored the degree to which Iranians in Iran perform revolution, especially for Iranian diasporic subjects such as herself. She reads the shifting of headscarf placement and the tightness

of clothes as signifiers of social change—an interesting notion, but one that she does not pursue further. She also notes, but does not examine, how the state has changed its enforcement of the Islamic codes. She unproblematically accepts her interlocutors' perceptions of the novelty of their resistance practices or *fitna* (moral chaos) (8). There is a missed opportunity here to ask how the discourse of sexual revolution began and what purchase it has.

Heterosexual practices are the focus of this book. Although Mahdavi mentions in a footnote that “homosexuality emerged as a theme throughout my time in Iran,” she does not explore this topic herself, writing it off as a “complex topic” that must be contextualized—in the way that Najmabadi has—through its historical emergence in Islam and Iran over the last several centuries (31). She notes that the stories told by her friends of sexual exploits that took place in 1998, which suggested the pervasiveness of homosexuality in Iran, did not match her imagined sense of what she would find. But what is novel to the anthropologist does not necessarily designate something new; there is in this text an unexplored projection of diasporic anxiety and longing wherein personal discoveries that do not coincide with contemporary realities count for novel cultural phenomena. Mahdavi's text stands, then, as an example of contemporary writing on women and Iran that draws on the cachet of the topic of sex, gender, and Islam without engaging in productive ways with theories of gender and sexuality.

SHARED MOTIFS

Almost all of the texts examine questions of visibility, the veil, secularism, modernity, and the relevance of Foucault's work. Naghibi, Moallem, and Mottahedeh overtly theorize visibility, while many of the other scholars grapple with questions of visibility indirectly through an analysis of the policing of public and private space. Visibility is a felicitous category in this sense, encompassing discussions of veiling, the gender segregation of space, and the various moral codes that apply to women and men differently in public and in private. Perhaps due to Iran's high-profile and critically acclaimed film industry, Moallem, Afary, Mottahedeh, and Naghibi look to cinema for further examination of these themes of visibility and invisibility, as well as

for the subversive implications it has had for postrevolutionary feminism. For Najmabadi, visibility is explored through Qajar-era paintings and various other art objects that render idealized human forms.

The critical importance of the veil rests on its material and symbolic work of controlling visibility. Moallem reads what she calls “fields of visibility” in a variety of historical and political contexts as “representational frames” or discursive formations that make subjects knowable and available for discipline (32). For example, in the context of Iran in the twentieth century, the veil has functioned as a representational frame through which women have been policed and coerced by the state and by discourse. As Moallem points out, during the Pahlavi dynasty women were forced to unveil in order to perform a modern femininity on par with secular Europe, whereas women in postrevolutionary Iran are forced to veil in order to perform a piety in keeping with the gendered codes of an Islamic modernity (69). Naghibi, Moallem, Najmabadi, and Afary all examine Reza Shah Pahlavi’s Unveiling Act of 1936 as well as Ayatollah Khomeini’s Veiling Act of 1983. These policies are considered paradigmatic examples of the instrumentalization of women’s bodies by these differently positioned regimes.

In addition to visibility, modernity is the topic unavoidably addressed in some way by all of the scholars, with lesser or greater critical engagement depending on the project. Najmabadi’s monograph and Babayan and Najmabadi’s anthology prompt the most engaged and thorough discussion on the topic; they handle it with the greatest ethical precision as historiographers grappling with cross-temporal reading and representational practices. Most importantly, there is a distinction made in this work between “modern Iran,” as Afary refers to it and “Iranian modernity,” as it is used by Najmabadi in *Women with Mustaches* and by Babayan and Najmabadi in *Islamicate Sexualities*, the former signifying the common sense use of the term modern, to mean contemporary, compared to the situated and competing notion of Iranian modernity expressed in the latter. Furthermore, there is Moallem’s notion of Iranian postmodernity, which reads the coexistence of disparate and competing political, social, economic, and gendered phenomena as internally coherent to the Iranian context, despite unintelligibility to Western modernity.

Contemporary publications on gender, sexuality, and Iran spanning the scholarly popular spectrum share a preoccupation with modernity and the modern bifurcation of gender behavior and sexual embodiment. As Najmabadi has put it in her contribution to the anthology, there is a “modern imperative to think ‘man’ and ‘woman,’” and this has reduced the scholarship on the history of sexuality to what she terms the interpretation of “types or acts” (275). The current wave of publications seems to be split between two strands: works that continue in this hetero- and gender-normative interpretative tradition versus a queer-theory-influenced strand that problematizes prior universalist interpretations of gender and sexuality. Sexuality is overtly theorized by employing various queer theoretical models of interpretation in Najmabadi and Babayan’s anthology, as well as in Najmabadi’s and Moallem’s monographs, while it is unself-consciously replicated as a sociological category that reflects social mores and normative behaviors in Mahdavi’s and Afary’s. Particularly troubling is the comparison made between the Victorian-era prudishness represented in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* with what Afary calls the “new sexual austerities that were imposed after the revolution” (323). Comparing the European nineteenth century with the Iranian late twentieth century implies that societies evolve through similar social processes. Afary also suggests that the Iranian state socially regressed in its position on women’s rights and various other social policies, stating “the state revived premodern social conventions (repudiation, veiling, flogging)” (323). This reading employs a logic that is at the heart of hegemonic Western modernity: the anxiety of a devolutionary regression from civilization to barbarism. What is additionally troubling is Afary’s idealization of Western LGBT organizations and the rights they have obtained, even going so far as to uncritically cite the work of conservative gay activists such as Doug Ireland and Peter Tatchell who have published ethnocentric screeds vilifying the Iranian state for its “barbaric” treatment of “gays and lesbians” (355, 358).

Almost all of the authors whose work I have reviewed here cite Foucault’s influence. However, their varied readings of Foucault’s wide oeuvre make possible radically different interpretations. How does Foucault’s work influence these texts—both his work on discourse (which Moallem

and Naghibi cite) and his work on sexuality (which Afary, Babayan and Najmabadi cite): While Moallem, Naghibi, Najmabadi, and Babayan and Najmadi certainly do attend to the discourse of sexuality, Mahdavi and Afary seem to be looking at the “truth” about sex vis-à-vis the notion of the “sexual revolution.”

Secularism also functions as an important pivoting point for all of the books reviewed here, but only Moallem’s and Babayan and Najmabadi’s projects explicitly take up the issue of Islam as it pertains to gender and sexuality. Sometimes synonymous with modernity and Western cultural influences (including liberal feminism), and sometimes distinguished from these through its uniquely Iranian valences (for example Naghibi’s discussion of “Pahlavi feminism”), secularism is the often-unmentioned yet ever-present catalyst in the construction of contemporary Iran. It is the logic through which the barbarism of the IRI is relationally constructed, and it functions as a counterpoint to the unintelligibility of Shari’a law. Most, if not all, of the popular memoirs I consulted are written for a secular audience, whether domestic, diasporic Iranian, or Western. Whereas the scholarly publications seem to be split on this matter, Moallem’s work explicitly theorizes beyond this limited binary through an analysis of postrevolutionary Iranian postmodernity (4). And Najmabadi counterintuitively reads secularism and modernity as the central influences behind the formation of the binary, heteronormative sex/gender system in Iran following the more permissible homoerotics characteristic of the Qajar period.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to examine the recent efflorescence of representations of Iranian women, gender, and sexuality on two parallel publishing tracks: popular trade and academic. Read alongside the post-9/11 proliferation of Iranian women’s memoirs, I set out to understand how feminist scholarship on Iran distinguishes itself, given the interpellative pressures of the marketplace and contemporary notions of subjectivity for Iranian women. As I have attempted to show, avoiding the trappings of representation that reduce Iranian women to either injured, abjected, or liberated through Western modernity requires a precise engagement with interdisciplinary fields in the construction of analytical techniques that work against

the hailing of the marketplace. If we are to seriously take up Spivak's call it cannot be by way of the logic of markets, or normative subjectivity. Instead, as many of the projects I have outlined here illustrate, the routes we must take will be circuitous, tedious, and counterintuitive but will ideally enable political possibilities that exceed the conditions that have produced the circumstances we examine.

NOTES

Thanks to Kalindi Vora for thoughtful and engaged feedback and to the *Feminist Studies* editorial collective for their interest in this topic and suggestions for revision.

1. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271.
2. Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 36; Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xx–xxi.
3. Other examples include Firoozeh Dumas, *Laughing Without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen* (New York: Random House, 2009); Firoozeh Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (New York: Random House, 2003); Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).
4. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); and Jasbir Puar *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
5. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 287.
6. For a more detailed discussion of these memoirs, see Roya Rastegar, "Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism and 'Liberating' Iranian Women," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1/2 (2006): 108–28; Catherine Burwell, "Reading Lolita in Times of War: Women's Book Clubs and the Politics of Reception," *Intercultural Education* 18, no. 4 (2007): 281–296; and John Carlos Rowe, "Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran in Idaho," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (2007): 253–75.
7. Laila Lalami, "Book Review: 'A Quiet Revolution' by Leila Ahmed," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 2011, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/books/la-ca-leila-ahmed-20110731,0,2711180#story#tugs_story_display (accessed September 11, 2011).
8. Lisa Rolof, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
9. Reza Shah Pahlavi (1978–1944), the founder of the Pahlavi monarchy, sought "modernization," secularism, and the globalization of Iranian oil. His descendant Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980) co-conspired with Britain and France in the overthrow

- of the democratically elected Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 to resume the family's dynastic reign until the Iranian Revolution of 1979, at which time he was exiled.
10. Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 64.
 11. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51–80; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anti-Capitalist Struggles," *Signs* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 499–535.
 12. While Adorno's "negative aesthetics" exposes the conventional and ideological nature of the real, the notion of feminist negative aesthetics builds upon this by undermining conventions of representation that promote ideological and uncritical engagement with the "real," regarding representations of women and gender. See *Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
 13. See Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).